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ABSTRACT

Pretend play is often undervalued and ignored. This videotape and accompanying booklet highlight how the dramatic scenarios, microworlds, storytelling, and block building of pretend play provide young children the opportunity to develop skills for a lifetime of intellectual, social, emotional, and creative development. The booklet describes the importance of various types of pretend play for young children, focusing on pretend play and its potential impact on other areas of development. The booklet also describes sources for children's pretend play ideas, and presents suggestions for arranging children's play environment. It includes a 30-minute videotape which presents sequences of children's pretend play in early childhood settings, accompanied by the comments of child development experts. (KB)

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UNDERSTANDING PRETEND PLAY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

A guide for parents and teachers to accompany the documentary video **"When a Child Pretends"**

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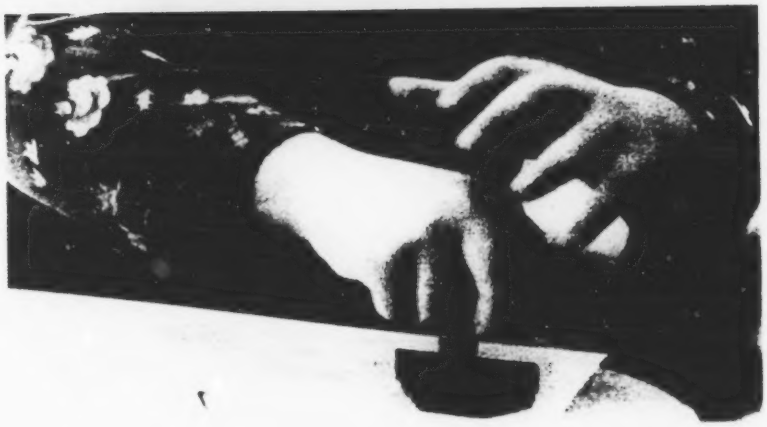

what is pretend play?

Children play in many different ways. They stack blocks, throw and catch balls, explore new spaces, climb trees, put puzzles together, and play games from hide-and-seek to checkers, each with its own rules. Children play in another way too. When they are very young, about two years of age, they begin to pretend. Pretending continues and becomes more complex as the child grows older. What is pretend play? In pretending, children imaginatively transform objects, play the roles of other people, give voices to miniature figures, and develop scenarios for their dramas.

Watching a two or three year old child at play, we might see her pretending to feed a baby doll, or setting the table and pretending to eat. How do we know the child is pretending? Her actions suggest the actions of everyday life but are more like a sketch than a copy. She brings the cup to her lips and pantomimes drinking, or lifts a toy pitcher as if pouring something into a cup. But she is not surprised that there is no real milk or apple juice. For the moment, she knows she is pretending. If we see a two or three year old actually bite into the "pizza" she just made of play dough, we realize that the boundary between real and pretend is not always so clear. This kind of confusion is less likely to happen later on, although sometimes older children have to remind themselves or their co-players that it's just pretend.

Imagine a four year old selecting blocks and building a small structure. Then he places three small vehicles inside. A moment later, he moves two of the vehicles across the floor while providing sound effects, bumps them into each other, and says "Oh, I crashed you. Sorry." In a slightly different voice, he says, "That is o.k." He then guides the two little trucks on parallel paths. Whether this play rests on an experienced or imagined car accident, it shows us a child using materials in support of storytelling and using his voice to enact two parts in a drama.

Observing children in preschool settings, and in their home and neighborhood

environments, we can see both forms of play illustrated above: Dramatic role play in which the children take roles and enact a scenario as they create it, and miniature world play in which they use a range of small scale materials as well as their actions and voices to develop the story. Whether the scenario seems close to the child's experience or at some distance from it, the child pretending is taking a leap from the here-and-now to an imagined reality.

For some children, the first pretending takes place with a parent, caregiver, or older sibling who initiates the play or responds to the child's overtures. The parent, caregiver, sister or brother may subsequently become a play partner for the young child. Adults in this role should take their lead from the children, being responsive and encouraging rather than introducing themes or materials. A parent's participation is appropriate if she or he follows the children's ideas and ways of playing.

playing with others

Opportunities to play with peers, in school settings or the home environment, are important in the preschool years and beyond. Playing with others, children collaborate on sharing materials, exploring possibilities, making decisions, and developing stories that meet their interests. They share their experience and learn about experiences of other children. They negotiate and compromise in order to keep play going. When they come into conflict, they often improvise solutions. Pretend play is the child's domain. For this reason, children at play are motivated to find ways of solving the problems that arise.

solo play

Sometimes children play by themselves, even in a school environment where other children are close by. At home, children may play alone by choice or because they do not have a play partner. The child

playing alone is free to select materials and invent stories as she chooses. For many children, solo playing is an important opportunity to explore and invent, to enter the world of imagination, perhaps to have control as "master builder" without the necessity for negotiation and compromise that arises when playing with peers or siblings. The child's choice to play alone should be supported as long as the play shows variation. If the play is very repetitive, or the child seems to be withdrawing into a shell, then efforts should be made to provide greater opportunities for play with other children.

where children find their ideas for pretend play

What resources do children tap to create the characters and themes of their dramas? The sources of pretend play ideas are varied, and the kinds of situations that children observe and participate in differ among families and between cultural groups. Children everywhere draw upon their experience of events at home and in the neighborhood, in school and in other environments, as rich material for their play. We see children enacting meal-times and other domestic scenes, setting up pretend stores and taking the roles of buyers and sellers, placing chairs in a row to form a train, or arranging furniture as an office. Providing children with opportunities to explore their geographic and social environments — for example, by taking them on walks in the neighborhood or introducing them to people working in the community — extends the range of their first-hand experience and contributes to resources for pretending. In this media-dominated age, we sometimes overlook the importance of experiencing the world first-hand, moving through it, looking, listening, and touching.

Storytelling, books, television programs, videotapes and films are other sources of ideas for play. Children adapt the characters and plots of media scenarios in accord with their interests and understanding. We rarely see replication of the original dramas, but rather a transformation that bears the child's stamp. However, excessive viewing of TV programs or particular videotapes can lead to reliance on stock characters and pre-scripted scenarios and so inhibit the child's ability to invent and improvise. Without cutting children off from the programs and videos that form part of their culture, parents can exercise judgement about selection. They can encourage alternatives — especially storytelling, book reading, and play. Whatever the theme, children at play need adults to place limits on extreme action, escalating argument, or lack of fairness.

The child's inner life, her conflicts and fantasies, also provide material for play. We often see children playing out situations that they could not have witnessed or learned of through the media. For example, two sisters who grew up in a completely non-violent home regularly played a game of hitting one of their dolls. Another pair of children playing together invented situations in which the lead characters acted in dramatic defiance of social rules and everyday reality, pretending to enter places via windows rather than doors, walking backwards, and speaking an incomprehensible language. Often, unhappy situations of real life, such as the death of a grandparent, are transformed in play into stories with happy endings. In all these cases, the child is drawing on feelings, wishes and other fantasies to develop dramatic scenarios in which they express and work through underlying concerns.

play environments

Children call on the resources of their experience and imagination when pretending. Providing spaces and a variety of materials, adults help set the stage for children to begin their play.

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setting the stage for dramatic play

In a culture of specially constructed environments and aggressive marketing of toys, we sometimes forget that pretending can take place almost anywhere and that children are amazingly resourceful about transforming available materials into the props they need for play. A sandy lot can be a battlefield or an ocean, the corner of the living room a grocery store or magic castle. At an imaginary feast, shells serve as cups, leaves as plates, and small pebbles as dessert. A range of natural objects can be pressed into service as "weapons."

Given a choice, many children in our culture prefer realistic props for their play — small scale pots, pans, and dishes for housekeeping play; recognizable pieces of clothing for dress up; knights' regalia for feudal wars. It is helpful to have some ready-made play materials such as play kitchen equipment or a doctor's set, but many discarded household items serve equally well as props for play. For example, an old telephone, a small file box, outdated checks or other forms, and defunct computer equipment are the stuff out of which offices are made. Dress-up clothes might include parents' old hats, purses,briefcases, and lunchboxes as well as an assortment of fabric pieces that can serve as shawls, wrap-around skirts, or super-heroes' capes.

Materials that can be used in different ways, such as a piece of fabric or a small box, require transformations that stretch the imagination. On the other hand, the availability of toys with clear identities may reduce the work of creating props and leave more energy for developing play narratives. For this reason, a balance of materials seems the best idea. Children sometimes have strong desires for toys such as Barbie dolls, the latest laser gun or the robotic man of the hour. Whether parents decide to go along with their children's requests in such matters is a personal decision. Such toys do not limit imaginative play unless they are used to the exclusion of other materials, but all toys with predefined identities suggest some themes rather than others.

encouraging miniature world play

How can we facilitate the child's miniature world play, whether the child is playing alone or with others? It is helpful to have some clear floor space for building structures and enacting dramas, although this is not essential. Children use nooks and crannies, spaces under tables, and stretches of rug as stages for creating miniature worlds. Sometimes they prefer these more communal spaces. At other times, they find a hidden corner entirely out of view, or they may take their materials outdoors and build an environment in a pile of sand.

In addition to providing miniature figures and vehicles, and building blocks or other construction materials such as cardboard boxes, parents can help their children acquire a collection of odds and ends including buttons, pebbles, scraps of cloth, pipe cleaners, shells, and so forth. The collection will be interesting in itself, and the objects will inspire miniature world play in a variety of ways.

For both miniature world play and dramatic play, the presence of an adult in the next room or nearby contributes to the child's sense that play is valued and that help is available if needed.

arranging the materials

To promote children's initiating play by themselves or with others, it's a good idea to have play materials readily accessible, within reach wherever possible. It is also helpful to have places for things, so the child can find what he is looking for on his own. Blocks or other construction materials are best placed on a shelf but can be in a box or basket. Small figures and vehicles may be placed in containers or arranged on a shelf. The collection of odds and ends should have its own box. For young children, materials should be visible as well as within reach. For instance, if miniature vehicles are in a box rather than in a basket or on a shelf, a car or truck can be placed on top to show the contents. While some consistency in arrangement is helpful, too strict assignment of places for props interferes with the sense of freedom that promotes spontaneous play.

the importance of pretend play

When children pretend, they are deeply engaged in many kinds of learning. Actively involved with other children, sometimes with adults, they explore materials and discover possibilities, confront problems and find solutions, create narratives that reflect and extend their experience of themselves and the world. In this way, they learn without being directly taught.

If children are playing together, they will be collaborating and negotiating. Dramatic play is a particularly rich area for exploring and consolidating learnings about the social world. Taking parts that range from baby to astronaut, engaging in exchanges of buying and selling, organizing a wedding party, being conductor or passenger on a train, children enact their understandings of social roles, the reciprocity of roles, and the modes of conduct in their social milieu. Playing house, they not only assign or take on roles, but arrange materials and become involved in activities such as measuring ingredients to make an imaginary cake. Children arranging chairs to form a pretend train will count the seats, make and distribute tickets, and discuss and decide upon destinations. Making signs or tickets, they may use pretend writing, which is a step on the way to literacy.

Two five year olds building a zoo provides another example of the many ways that children learn in the process of pretend play. Carefully selecting blocks of certain sizes, the children place them one on top of another to make walls, place the walls at right angles to form an enclosure, form cage spaces within the larger enclosure, and leave an opening for the comings and goings of zookeepers and visitors. One child suggests they add a tower "like the one in the Central Park Zoo" and the other agrees. To this point, the children have collaborated with each other in the construction process, making suggestions and decisions, perhaps

compromising. In all likelihood, as they made their building, they added to their understanding of physical principles and the aesthetics of arrangement. In their interactions with each other, they have also exercised and enhanced their social understandings and skills in how to work with another person, how to stand up for themselves. Now they gather the animals and start to arrange them. They engage in a discussion about which kinds of animals should be close together in the zoo. As they deal with grouping the animals, they use language to clarify their ideas about classification. They do not find the "zookeeper" people they look for among the miniature figures, and decide that two "regular" figures can be used as zookeepers. This transformation is accomplished by using language to re-name the figures. At this point, the children embark on a jointly constructed story in which parents bring their children to the zoo, a tiger escapes, children and grown-ups scatter in all directions, the tiger is caught and contained, and parents find their children in the crowd. The narrative is realized through a combination of action and language, with the players giving voice to miniature figures while intermittently telling parts of the story. As the children arrange episodes in a sequence, they make connections between parts of the story. Constructing narrative, as these children are doing, is a process known to be essential for remembering, for communicating real and imagined events, and — more generally — for making sense of experience. Because pretend play allows children to construct narratives spontaneously, alone or in collaboration with others, it is an arena for the development of one of the most important intellectual capacities of the human mind.

Too often, pretend play is seen simply as the child's entertainment, a pleasurable activity perhaps beneficial for a sense of well being but not relevant to

intellectual development. Emphasis is placed on early teaching of reading and writing, and introduction to other academic skills. In fact, when children pretend, they are involved in focused intellectual work grounded in observation, exploration and experimentation.

Transforming objects, taking on roles, developing narratives of real or imagined situations, they use the kind of "as if" thinking that will later enable forming scientific hypotheses and creative work in the arts. The acquisition of knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities that take place in the context of pretend play prepare the way for many kinds of later academic learning.

Pretend play takes different forms as children grow older but it does not fade away. Children continue to tell stories, take roles and invent fictions. Dramatic play can become the basis for more structured dramas, as in school where social studies content may be transformed into a script written by the children. Pretend play can also lead to making up games with rules, for example, an original board game.

where does pretend play lead?

Learning that first takes place in pretend play forms the basis for later intellectual and social developments:

- Academic work as it draws on reasoning and the capacity to represent experience through the use of symbols, especially with regard to literacy
- The ability to think hypothetically and test out ideas, to imagine what does not yet exist in both aesthetic and scientific realms
- The development of narrative construction in storytelling, non-fiction, and historical study
- All forms of collaborative work that involve the sharing of ideas, planning, negotiation and compromise
- Pretend play is the basis on which interests and capabilities, imaginative and intellectual strengths are formed. It is the most fertile area for the development of the child's mind

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